
Nuclear signalling in the Russian-Ukrainian war

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On Sunday 27th February (the day before the meeting of the Russian and Ukrainian negotiating teams), President Vladimir Putin announced that the nuclear forces of the Russian Federation would be under increased readiness. Let's add that Putin did not specify whether it is a strategic or a non-strategic force.

This was not the first example of the Kremlin's strategic signalling relating to nuclear weapons during the ongoing crisis. Already at the end of last year, it announced that the annual strategic exercises of the nuclear forces ("Grom"), which usually takes place in autumn, would be postponed until February. On the eve of the crisis, the Kremlin capitalised on a seemingly ill-considered statement of Volodymyr Zelensky, who during the Munich Security Conference said that in the face of Russia's aggression and the lack of an adequate response from Western countries, Kyiv considers the provisions of the Budapest Memorandum to be unbinding, which should be read (and this was also Russia's perception) as Ukraine's withdrawal from its decision to abandon its nuclear weapons acquisition program. In response to Zelenskiy's words, both Putin and Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu reacted with more or less explicit threats related to the sense of threat to Russia and the need to "react to a real danger in the event that Ukraine acquires weapons of mass destruction." It is worth noting that Putin's words referred not only to nuclear weapons, but also to chemical and biological weapons - which seems important in the context of hypothetical attempts by Ukraine to keep pace with Russia on the escalation ladder. The Russian president has tried to make his concerns credible by stating that he does not consider the Ukrainian threats to be empty, and that Kyiv "possesses significant competences" in the technology needed to construct a nuclear weapon. Putin's statement on Monday was obviously also directed towards the West, which "may help Ukraine to obtain these weapons, creating another threat to our country." Finally, during his speech, which was essentially a declaration of war on Ukraine, Putin made another warning, aimed at deterring Western countries from potential involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, saying that "Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear powers" and that it has an advantage "in some of the most important modern types of weapons (...). No one should be under the illusion that any potential aggressor will suffer defeat and terrible consequences if he tries to attack our country." On Friday, the media published a recording - according to some commentators from the Moscow Ring Road - showing a nuclear-carrying ballistic missile (Yars) with an intercontinental range. Finally, on Sunday, the above-mentioned information about increasing the state of readiness of nuclear forces circulated around the world.

Russia's actions should not come as a surprise in the light of both the Russian declarative policy (formulated in the document published on 2nd June 2020, entitled "The Foundations of State Policy in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence"), previous actions by the Russian Federation (for example after the

annexation of Crimea) and speeches by representatives of the Kremlin administration. From the 1990s onwards, when it first revised the declaration of no first use of nuclear weapons (NFU) that had been in place since the Soviet times, Russia has been consistently developing capabilities in the field of non-strategic (and therefore, extremely briefly speaking, shorter-range with limited explosive power) nuclear weapons. Over time, the concept of using these weapons was baptised in the West as the doctrine of nuclear de-escalation ("escalate to de-escalate"). As we noted in the part of the New Model Army report devoted to the problem of managing the dynamics of escalation and Russian nuclear threats, this doctrine stipulates that "the Russians could decide to use nuclear weapons to galvanise territorial or political gains achieved in the course of a quick campaign (several or a dozen or so days, at most). Or they could try to end the conflict on acceptable terms at the moment when, in the course of a failed campaign, defeat becomes real, making it impossible for the Kremlin to achieve its military goals. Then the Russians can take advantage of the threat of using the doctrine of nuclear de-escalation to communicate to the Americans the danger of uncontrolled escalation if hostilities continue."

In the part of the New Model Army report on nuclear escalation, we state that a characteristic feature of the Russian threats to use nuclear weapons in the nuclear de-escalation paradigm is that they are not directed at the country against which they would be used, but above all against its nuclear-weapons-possessing patron, usually the United States. This is primarily because the threat of Moscow's use of a nuclear weapon is to force the West to be ready to accept concessions to the Russians. The alternative may be a nuclear conflict - initially limited, but with the risk of an uncontrolled escalation if the West does not "let go." By threatening to use nuclear weapons in the course of a conventional conflict, the Russians are deliberately and consciously presenting themselves as a state ready to lead to an asymmetric, and perhaps uncontrolled, escalation. The essence of Russia's nuclear de-escalation strategy - and hence its readiness to "enter" a limited nuclear war - is then what Thomas Schelling once called "competition in risk taking," where the risk is the danger of an uncontrolled escalation. The Russians believe that they will be able to win this competition, because the stakes are greater for them than for the Western countries - and thus in the face of Russian threats that could lead to a catastrophic full nuclear exchange, Western capitals will have to say "*pass*."

It is worth noting that this calculation does not apply to the country that is the victim of Russian aggression. If the stake in the game with Russia is the continued existence of statehood (and the survival of the authorities of the attacked state), the deterrent potential of Russian threats is limited. Unlike the West, they may be ready to see if the Russians are accidentally bluffing - especially if there are reasons to believe so. Such risk tolerance has been demonstrated by the Ukrainians during this conflict: shortly after Russia raised the level of nuclear readiness, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba announced that this was "an attempt to raise the stakes and put pressure on the Ukrainian delegation," and that the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia "will be a catastrophe for the world, but it will not break us." Therefore, Kuleba signalled that the Russians, trying to force the Ukrainians to de-escalate the conflict and accept some of their demands by means of threats to use this weapon, had failed. His words also implied that if Moscow were to do so, it would have to use nuclear weapons more than once. However, this is where the problem arises, because although Ukraine is signalling its readiness to test the Russian bluff (or even to continue the fight in the unlikely scenario of Russia meeting its threats), there are reasons to suspect that the Americans - for obvious reasons - may not show a similar risk tolerance as the Ukrainians. So there is a danger that, if they take the Russian threats seriously, the Americans may in a sense become an instrument of the Russians, and fearing Russia will use nuclear weapons, they will start to pressure the Ukrainians to accept at least some of the conditions set by the Kremlin. The role of

Western pressure should not be ignored. It seems that it was under the pressure of the United States and Ukraine's Western European partners that it was decided that Ukraine would not order universal mobilisation before the outbreak of the conflict, and this had a real impact on the ability of the Ukrainian armed forces to resist Russian forces. An important issue will therefore be the susceptibility of the Ukrainian state leadership to the pressure of Washington, London, Berlin or Paris. For now, however, the White House appears to be very cautious about Russian signalling efforts. In response to the question, "Should Americans be afraid of a nuclear war?", when asked during Sunday's speech, US President Joe Biden simply replied, "No." White House spokesman Jen Psaki, on the other hand, said during a press briefing that the United States, "did not see any justification for increasing the readiness" of its own nuclear forces.

This author remains sceptical about the likelihood of Russia using a nuclear weapon in the current conflict. Ukraine is a conventionally (much) weaker country, with no power projection capacity towards Moscow and no nuclear weapons. The use of nuclear weapons against them would be an extremely disproportionate reaction and - from the point of view of interactions with the Kremlin on the international stage - irrational. There is no doubt that, as a result of Russia breaking the nuclear taboo (and in the course of an aggressive war), not only the West, but also China and India, for example, would at least have to deeply re-evaluate the analysis of profits and losses associated with cooperation with the Kremlin, and probably the result of this the analysis would mean a sharp and far-reaching restriction of cooperation with Moscow.

Second, although it may seem that with the disastrous course of the campaign in Ukraine and the Western sanctions in its wake, Russia has already become a pariah on the international stage, this author believes that Russia's use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine for de-escalation purposes would have consequences far more than those that Moscow has had to deal with today. It seems that the fact that the Western sanctions were imposed so suddenly and jumped at least a few steps on the escalation ladder (even on Thursday, the sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and the EU were still quite conservative), makes one wonder if they were less the fruit of cold calculation and more the result of an emotional reaction and the result of enormous social pressure caused by the perception of the crisis by the societies of Western countries. This, in turn, may mean that with the gradual extinction of emotions among Western decision-makers and societies (which will come inevitably), the consequences of these sanctions, such as Russia's full thrust into China's orbit, or the rapidly rising energy prices and accompanying inflation, will force Western decision-makers to their relaxation, at least partially. However, the use of nuclear weapons would prevent this kind of action, permanently relegating Russia to the status of a rogue state. Finally, although Ukraine is not covered by security guarantees from the United States or other nuclear-weapon states, Russia must be aware that with the use of nuclear weapons, possibly multiple times, the actual risk of uncontrolled nuclear exchange with other nuclear powers is growing (as a result of error, miscalculation or technical errors).

The Russians can - and will most likely try - to continue their strategic signalling when their attempts to put pressure on Ukraine fail, and the Americans and Europeans are unwilling or able to persuade Kyiv to enter into negotiations and Ukraine accept at least some of the Russian demands. If this does happen, one can imagine subsequent speeches by Putin and/or other representatives of the Russian government (Gerasimov, Shoygu) in which threats will be formulated against Ukraine and the West. The Russians themselves can also cultivate a narrative according to which Vladimir Putin is increasingly unpredictable and desperate about the way things are in Ukraine. Such a strategy was adopted by the

